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Evolution and Mr. Bryan

By HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

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"SCIENCE AND RELIGION"

LEAFLETS

Evolution and the Bible. *Edwin G. Conklin.* Princeton University.

Evolution and Mr. Bryan. *Harry Emerson Fosdick,* Union Theological Seminary.

How Science Helps Our Faith. *Shailer Mathews.*

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the author of this pamphlet, is a distinguished preacher, teacher and theologian. He has been Professor of Practical Theology in Union Theological Seminary, New York City since 1915. Upon the recent union of three great Presbyterian Churches in the same city, he was chosen as the preacher. He is widely known through his little books, of which "The Manhood of the Master" and "The Meaning of Faith" are examples.

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EVOLUTION AND MR. BRYAN

By

HARRY EMERSON FOSDICK

The editor of The Times* has asked me to reply to Mr. Bryan's statement on "God and Evolution." I do so, if only to voice the sentiments of a large number of Christian people who in the name of religion are quite as shocked as any scientist could be in the name of science at Mr. Bryan's sincere but appalling obscurantism.

So far as the scientific aspect of the discussion is concerned, scientists may well be left to handle it. Suffice it to say that when Mr. Bryan reduces evolution to a hypothesis and then identifies a hypothesis with a "guess" he is guilty of a sophistry so shallow and palpable that one wonders at his hardihood in risking it. A guess is a haphazard venture of opinion without investigation before or just reason afterward to sustain it; it is a *jeu*

*This article appeared in New York Times, Sunday, March 12.

d'esprit. But a hypothesis is a seriously proffered explanation of a difficult problem ventured when careful investigation of facts points to it, retained as long as the discovered facts sustain it, and surrendered as soon as another hypothesis enters the field which better explains the phenomena in question.

A Hypothesis

Every universally accepted scientific truth which we possess began as a hypothesis, is in a sense a hypothesis still, and has become a hypothesis transformed into a settled conviction as the mass of accumulating evidence left no question as to its substantial validity. To call evolution, therefore, a guess is one thing; to tell the truth about it is another, for to tell the truth involves recognizing the tireless patience with which generations of scientists in every appropriate field of inquiry have been investigating all discoverable facts that bear upon the

problem of mutation of species, with substantial unanimity as to the results so far as belief in the hypothesis of evolution is concerned. When Darwin, after years of patient, unremitting study, ventured his hypothesis in explanation of evolution—a hypothesis which was bound to be corrected and improved—one may say anything else one will about it except to call it a "guess." That is the one thing which it certainly was not. Today, the evolutionary hypothesis, after many years of pitiless attack and searching investigation, is, as a whole, the most adequate explanation of the facts with regard to the origin of species that we have yet attained, and it was never so solidly grounded as it is today. Dr. Osborne is making, surely, a safe statement when he says that no living naturalist, so far as he knows, "differs as to the immutable truth of evolution in the sense of the continuous fitness of plants and animals to their environment and the

ascent of all the extinct and existing forms of life, including man, from an original and single cellular state."

The Real Situation

When, therefore, Mr. Bryan says, "Neither Darwin nor his supporters have been able to find a fact in the universe to support their hypothesis," it would be difficult to imagine a statement more obviously and demonstrably mistaken. The real situation is that every fact on which investigation has been able to lay its hands helps to confirm the hypothesis of evolution. There is no known fact which stands out against it. Each newly discovered fact fits into an appropriate place in it. So far as the general outlines of it are concerned, the Copernican astronomy itself is hardly established more solidly.

My reply, however, is particularly concerned with the theological aspects of Mr. Bryan's statement. There seems to be no doubt about what his position is. He proposes to take his

science from the Bible. He proposes, certainly, to take no science that is contradicted by the Bible. He says, "Is it not strange that a Christian will accept Darwinism as a substitute for the Bible when the Bible not only does not support Darwin's hypothesis, but directly and expressly contradicts it?" What other interpretation of such a statement is possible except this: that the Bible is for Mr. Bryan an authoritative textbook in biology—and if in biology, why not in astronomy, cosmogony, chemistry, or any other science, art, concern of man whatever? One who is acquainted with the history of theological thought gasps as he reads this. At the close of the sixteenth century a Protestant theologian set down the importance of the book of Genesis as he understood it. He said that the text of Genesis "must be received strictly"; that "it contains all knowledge, human and divine"; that "twenty-eight articles of the Augsburg Confession are to be found in it"; that "it is an

arsenal of arguments against all sects and sorts of atheists, pagans, Jews, Turks, Tartars, Papists, Calvinists, Socinians, and Baptists"; that it is "the source of all science and arts, including law, medicine, philosophy, and rhetoric," "the source and essence of all histories and of all professions, trades, and works," "an exhibition of all virtues and vices," and "the origin of all consolation."

Luther and Bryan

One has supposed that the days when such wild anchronisms could pass muster as good theology were past, but Mr. Bryan is regalvanizing into life that same outmoded idea of what the Bible is, and proposes in the twentieth century that we shall use Genesis, which reflects the prescientific view of the Hebrew people centuries before Christ, as an authoritative textbook in science, beyond whose conclusions we dare not go.

Why, then, should Mr. Bryan complain because his attitude toward evolution is compared repeatedly, as he says it is, with the attitude of the theological opponents of Copernicus and Galileo? On his own statement, the parallelism is complete. "Martin Luther attacked Copernicus with the same appeal which Mr. Bryan uses. He appealed to the Bible. He said: "People gave ear to an upstart astrologer who strove to show that the earth revolves, not the heavens or the firmament, the sun and the moon. Whoever wishes to appear clever must devise some new system, which of all systems is, of course, the very best. This fool wishes to reverse the entire science of astronomy, but sacred Scripture tells us that Joshua commanded the sun to stand still, and not the earth."

Nor was Martin Luther wrong if the Bible is indeed an authoritative textbook in science. The denial of the Copernican astronomy with its moving earth can unquestionably be found in the Bible if one starts out to use the Bible that way—"The world

also is established, that it cannot be moved" (Psalm 93:1); "Who laid the foundations of the earth, that it should not be moved forever" (Psalm 104:5). Moreover, in those bygone days, the people who were then using Mr. Bryan's method of argument did quote these passages as proof, and Father Inchofer felt so confident that he cried, "The opinion of the earth's motion is of all heresies the most abominable, the most pernicious, the most scandalous; the immovability of the earth is thrice sacred; argument against the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, and the incarnation should be tolerated sooner than an argument to prove that the earth moves."

The Hebrew Universe

Indeed, as everybody knows who has seriously studied the Bible, that book represents in its cosmology and its cosmogony the view of the physical universe which everywhere obtained in the ancient Semitic world.

The earth was flat and was founded on an underlying sea (Psalm 136:6; Psalm 24: 1-2; Genesis 7:11); it was stationary; the heavens, like an upturned bowl, "strong as a molten mirror" (Job 37: 18; Genesis 1:6-8; Isaiah 40:22; Psalm 104:2), rested on the earth beneath (Amos 9:6; Job 26:11); the sun, moon, and stars moved within this firmament of special purpose to illumine man (Genesis 1:14-19); there was a sea above the sky, "the waters which were above the firmament" (Genesis 1:7; Psalm 148:4) and through "the windows of heaven" the rain came down (Genesis 7:11; Psalm 78:23); beneath the earth was mysterious Sheol where dwelt the shadowy dead (Isaiah 14:9-11); and all this had been made in six days, each of which had had a morning and an evening, a short and measurable time before (Genesis 1).

Are we to understand that this is Mr. Bryan's science, that we must teach this science in our schools, that we are stopped by divine revelation

from ever going beyond this science? Yet this is exactly what Mr. Bryan would force us to if with intellectual consistency he should carry out the implications of his appeal to the Bible against the scientific hypothesis of evolution in biology.

The Bible's Precious Truths

One who is a teacher and preacher of religion raises his protest against all this just because it does such gross injustice to the Bible. There is no book to compare with it. The world never needed more its fundamental principles of life, its fully developed views of God and man, its finest faiths and hopes and loves. When one reads an article like Mr. Bryan's one feels, not that the Bible is being defended, but that it is being attacked. Is a 'cello defended when instead of being used for music it is advertised as a good dinner table? Mr. Bryan does a similar disservice to the Bible when, instead of using it for what it is, the most noble, useful, inspiring and in-

spired book of spiritual life which we have, the record of God's progressive unfolding of his character and will from early primitive beginnings to the high noon in Christ, he sets it up for what it is not and never was meant to be—a procrustean bed to whose infallible measurements all human thought must be forever trimmed.

Origins and Values

The fundamental interest which leads Mr. Bryan and others of his school to hate evolution is the fear that it will depreciate the dignity of man. Just what do they mean? Even in the Book of Genesis God made man out of the dust of the earth. Surely, that is low enough to start and evolution starts no lower. So long as God is the Creative Power, what difference does it make whether out of the dust by sudden fiat or out of the dust by gradual process God brought man into being. Here man is and what he is he is. Were it decided that God had dropped him from

the sky, he still would be the man he is. If it is decided that God brought him up by slow gradations out of lower forms of life, he still is the man he is.

The fact is that the process by which man came to be upon the planet is a very important scientific problem, but it is not a crucially important religious problem. Origins prove nothing in the realm of values. To all folk of spiritual insight man, no matter by what process he at first arrived, is the child of God, made in his image, destined for his character. If one could appeal directly to Mr. Bryan he would wish to say: let the scientists thrash out the problems of man's biological origin but in the meantime do not teach men that if God did not make us by fiat then we have nothing but a bestial heritage. That is a lie which once believed will have a terrific harvest. It is regrettable business that a prominent Christian should be teaching that.

Danger of Materialistic Teaching

One writes this with warm sympathy for the cause which gives Mr. Bryan such anxious concern. He is fearful that the youth of the new generation, taught the doctrine of a materialistic science, may lose that religious faith in God and in the realities of the spiritual life on which alone an abiding civilization can be founded. His fear is well grounded, as every one closely associated with the students of our colleges and universities knows. Many of them are sadly confused, mentally in chaos, and, so far as any guiding principles of religious faith are concerned, are often without chart, compass, or anchor.

There are types of teaching in our universities which are hostile to any confidence in the creative reality of the spiritual life—dreary philosophies which reduce everything to predetermined mechanical activity. Some classrooms doubtless are, as Mr. Bryan thinks, antagonistic, in the

effect which they produce, alike to sustained integrity of character, buoyancy, and hopefulness of life and progress in society. But Mr. Bryan's association of this pessimistic and materialistic teaching with the biological theory of evolution is only drawing a red herring across the red trail. The distinction between inspiring, spiritually minded teachers and deadening, irreligious teachers is not at the point of belief in evolution at all. Our greatest teachers, as well as our poorest, those who are profoundly religious as well as those who are scornfully irreligious, believe in evolution. The new biology has no more to do with the difference between them than the new astronomy or the new chemistry. If the hypothesis of evolution were smashed tomorrow, there would be no more religiously minded scientists and no fewer irreligious ones.

The Heart of the Problem

The real crux of the problem in university circles is whether we are going to think of creative reality in physical or in spiritual terms, and

that question cannot be met on the lines that Mr. Bryan has laid down. Indeed, the real enemies of the Christian faith, so far as our students are concerned, are not the evolutionary biologists, but folk like Mr. Bryan who insist on setting up artificial adhesion between Christianity and outgrown scientific opinions, and who proclaim that we cannot have one without the other. The pity is that so many students will believe him and, finding it impossible to retain the outgrown scientific opinions, will give up Christianity in accordance with Mr. Bryan's insistence that they must.

Quite as amazing as his views of the Bible is Mr. Bryan's view of the effect of evolution upon man's thought of God. If ever a topsy-turvy statement was made about any matter capable of definitive information, Mr. Bryan's statement deserves that description, for it turns the truth upside down. He says: "The theistic evolutionist puts God so far away that he ceases to be a present influence in the life * * * Why should we

want to imprison God in an impenetrable past? His is a living world. Why not a living God upon the throne? Why not allow him to work now?" But the effect of evolution upon man's thought of God, as every serious student of theology knows, has been directly the opposite of what Mr. Bryan supposes. It was in the eighteenth century that men thought of God as the vague, dim figure over the crest of the first hill who gave this universal toboggan its primeval shove and has been watching it sliding ever since. It was in the eighteenth century that God was thought of as the absentee landlord who had built the house and left it—as the shipwright who had built the ship and then turned it over to the master mariners, his natural laws. Such ideas of God are associated with eighteenth century Deism, but the nineteenth century's most characteristic thought of God was in terms of immanence—God here in this world, the life of all that lives, the sustaining energy of all that lives, as our spirits are in our

bodies, permeating, vitalizing, directing all.

God Is Not a Carpenter

The idea of evolution was one of the great factors in this most profitable change. In a world nailed together like a box, God, the creator, had been thought of as a carpenter who created the universe long ago; now, in a world growing like a tree, ever more putting out new roots and branches, God has more and more been seen as the indwelling spiritual life. Consider that bright light of nineteenth century Christianity, Henry Drummond, the companion of D. L. Moody in his evangelistic tours. He believed in evolution. What did it do to his thought of God? Just what it has done to the thought of multitudes. Said Drummond: "If God appears periodically he disappears periodically. If he comes upon the scene at special crises, he is absent from the scene in the intervals. Whether is all-God or occasional-God the nobler theory? Positively the

idea of an immanent God, which is the God of evolution, is infinitely grander than the occasional wonder-worker who is the God of an old theology."

Mr. Bryan proposes, then, that instead of entering into this rich heritage where ancient faith, flowering out in new world views, grows richer with the passing centuries, we shall run ourselves into his mold of mediaevalism. He proposes, too, that his special form of mediaevalism shall be made authoritative by the state, promulgated as the only teaching allowed in the schools. Surely, we can promise him a long, long road to travel before he plunges the educational system of this country into such incredible folly, and if he does succeed in arousing a real battle over the issue we can promise him also that just as earnestly as the scientists will fight against him in the name of scientific freedom of investigation, so will multitudes of Christians fight against him in the name of their religion and their God.

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